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Why School Boys Should Be Taught to Shoot?

BY

GENERAL GEORGE W. WINGATE

President New York Public Schools Athletic League

N these days of crowded cities and strenuous work all forms of exercise are valuable to growing boys. Shooting is an interesting open air sport, in which the skill attained constitutes a valuable possession through life. It also involves more physical exercise than is generally appreciated. In particular, it develops coolness of nerve under excitement, powers of observation and rapid judgment, which are important mental qualities.

Its great benefit, however, is not so much to the boys who become expert shots, large though that is, as to their State and country. We should never forget that the existence of this republic was maintained and its liberties won by the skill in shooting shown by our ancestors against the Indians and the British. In New England, New York, Virginia, the Carolinas, and later in Kentucky, the first settlers held

their land and their lives by their skill as riflemen. At Lexington, Bunker Hill and upon many other occasions during the Revolution, and later at New Orleans, this disciplined skill overcame the veterans of the British Army—who were far superior in every military sense to the hasty levies opposed to them—except that they were bad shots.

This skill so impressed the world that even now the popular idea in many countries and among many of our own people is that America is a nation of marksmen. I regret to say that this is now very, very far from being the case; that while modern rifles have increased enormously in range and power, making it much more difficult to handle them to the best advantage than those used by our forefathers, the ordinary young American knows nothing about their use, much less in fact than the ordinary emigrant who is likely to have served two or more years in the army of his native country.

Here in the cities, there are no opportunities for practice. In the country, there is little desire. There are many who have shot guns but rifles are rare. Thus, when last Spring I happened to be in a small place in Florida and wanted to borrow a rifle to shoot an alligator, I found that while every man had a shot gun there was not a rifle in the place. I have also found this to be the case in many other local-

ities. If there is any rifle shooting, it is always at short distances and generally with small rifles, never with the military weapon.

The regular army of the country is absurdly small and is not kept full. At present, it is 60,000 strong and is diminishing daily, as the pay is too small to induce enlistments. With nominally 20,000 coast artillery—one third what is needed to man our forts, and 10,000 in the Philippines, we have an available force of not 20,000 men. In fact, few know how hard it was to scrape together the 5000 men that were recently sent to Cuba. In time of war the country must, therefore, in the future as in the past, look for its defence to hasty levies of volunteers. While not a military nation, we are a warlike and patriotic one. When the country calls, the best blood of our youth, both rich and poor, responds without hesitation. We can, as we did in the Civil War and in the Spanish War, rapidly assemble all the men we want. We can in a few months teach them considerable drill and a little discipline—*but, we cannot teach them to shoot.* The result is that they are and necessarily must be poor troops, as compared with soldiers of other countries.

The Spanish War was worth more than it cost, because it pointed out that the United States was living in a fool's paradise. We had all the resources of a rich, intelligent and ener-

getic country. We had all the men and all the money we could use. The experiences of the Civil War were recent in the memories of many. Yet General Shafter told me that when the 71st New York reported to him at Tampa, to form part of his expedition to Cuba, after being in a camp of instruction for some two months he was horrified to find that it contained 400 men who had never fired a shot from their rifles.

The volunteers who were first sent to the Philippines were equally unskilled with the exception of those from Tennessee, and from a few Western sections, who had used the rifle from boyhood. The same was also the case with most of the regiments later organized as United States Volunteers, who were carefully instructed in everything but the one fundamental necessity of a soldier, the ability to shoot straight.

It is indeed fortunate that these volunteers were only required to meet the disorganized soldiers of Spain and the wretchedly armed and worse shooting Filipinos.

Let us look at another and different instance which is fresh in our minds. The Boers were a handful of farmers—Grandfathers and small boys served together. They had no uniforms, no drill and less discipline. But they were trained riflemen, hunters from childhood, like

Jackson's Tennesseans at New Orleans. The result was that they withstood an overwhelming force of drilled and disciplined British troops (who were not at all bad shots) for many months, and were only conquered at a terrible expenditure of life and treasure. Yet while the Boers changed the military axiom that "One man behind a breastwork can keep off three outside," to one to six, and sometimes to one to ten, the Japanese stormed similar works with equal forces—because the Russians who held them had not been taught to shoot. The reader of General Ian Hamilton's "Scrap Book of a Staff Officer" who so vividly depicts the Japanese-Russian Campaign, cannot but be impressed by his constant references to how much more formidable opponents the Boers would have been than the Russians were.

There are many theories as to how the military strength of this country can be enhanced. They are mostly theories and will always remain so. Experience shows that in time of peace we will not increase our army; we will not create a reserve worthy of the name, and we will not make our National Guard into anything much different from the small force that it is today.

Some urge the introduction of military drill in the schools. This would be a good thing if it could be carried out. But I regret to say

that it cannot. Beginning in 1895, I spent three years on the Staff of the Commander-in-Chief of the G. A. R. as Special Aide in charge of this matter, and therefore speak from experience. During this period, the G. A. R. exerted all its great influence in every State in favor of the plan. It was favorably received by the press and the public, and the prospects at one time seemed promising for its success. But the difficulties of procuring instructors, drill halls, arms, and above all, uniforms (which, while indispensable, are claimed by many educators to create an invidious distinction between poor boys who cannot afford to buy them and those who can) proved insurmountable, and the movement dwindled and died.

There is, however, a way in which we can create a force of skilled riflemen from whom we will obtain volunteers in time of war, and whose skill will make up for their want of experience in military drill and discipline, and that is, by teaching our High School boys at least, to shoot with our military rifle. This is what is being extensively done abroad. Lord Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army, has been so impressed with the errors of the Boer War and the neccessity of preparing the English people to assist the British Army in defending Great Britain, that he is exerting his great influence to create rifle clubs and to have the

British school boys taught to shoot, with the result that hundreds of schools have taken up the matter. France is doing the same. Switzerland has no regular army, but depends for her defence on her riflemen. Though poor, she spends annually large amounts in developing them, both in and out of the schools. Out of a population of but three million—less than that of the City of New York in 1904, she had 3656 rifle clubs with a membership of 218,815, who shot twenty-one million cartridges with the army rifle.

It is not a novel, difficult, nor an expensive thing, to teach our boys to shoot. It is being done with great success in eleven of the great High Schools of New York City. This is largely owing to the use of the Sub-Target Gun Machine, which enables instruction to be given and practice had in an ordinary room, and saves the cost of ammunition, which otherwise would be almost prohibitory. This machine consists of an upright standard having at the top a horizontal rod in front of which is placed a target like a visiting card. To this is attached an ordinary Krag military rifle, which, while capable of being freely moved, is so adjusted that when aim is taken with the rifle at a target across the room, and the trigger is pulled, the rod punches a hole in the miniature target in the exact relative place where the

target aimed at would have been hit if the gun had been loaded. Practice with it is rapid, costs nothing, and involves no danger to any one. The instructor who stands alongside of the boy who is shooting is also able to follow the movement of the rod on the miniature target to see the manner in which he is aiming, and to correct his defects in holding, which it is impossible to do when a loaded gun is being used.

The young men attending the High Schools, some 7000 in number, are from fourteen to eighteen years of age, and are the "pick" of the Elementary Schools, as the great majority attending the latter are forced to go to work as soon as they graduate, which is usually at the age of fourteen. They are deeply interested in learning to shoot, and being stalwart young fellows, with sound nerves and at an age when they learn easily, are displaying wonderful skill. In fact, better than that usually displayed by the members of the National Guard Regiments, which are provided with similar machines. To avoid the tendency to concentrate too much effort upon the development of a crack team in each school, the League gives a "Marksman's Badge," similar to that which is given in the Army and in the National Guard. The qualification score for this badge was fixed at first at 41 out of a pos-

sible 50. The number who won it, however, was so great that it was raised to 42, afterwards to 44, and 1907 to 45, shot standing, target assimilated to 200 yards. This is a very high score, and yet this year the badge was won by 175 boys, thirty being sharpshooters, with a full score of ten consecutive bull's-eyes!

The League holds annual contests between the different High Schools with the Sub-Target Gun Machine for the "Whitney Trophy," a reproduction in bronze of Darley's "Battle of Lexington." In 1907 it was competed for by fifteen teams from ten High Schools, five being second teams. Manual Training High School (Brooklyn) was the winner, with a score of 237 out of a possible 250, fired from the shoulder. The closeness of the contest is shown by the fact that Morris High School followed with 235, Commercial with 233 and High School of Commerce and Curtis tied with 232 each.

The number of boys attending the High Schools is so great as to make it out of the question for the League to undertake to give them all practice in shooting with cartridges.

In order, however, to impress upon them that the skill which they may be able to attain with the Sub-Target Gun Machine will enable them to shoot well with a bullet in the open, the League has encouraged matches be-

tween teams from the different schools in the rifle galleries of the different regimental armories. It also holds an annual contest at Creedmoor for individual and team shooting at 100 and 400 yards—five shots at each distance in each match. These were first held in 1906, six High Schools participating.

The matches in 1907 received a great impetus from the fact that President Roosevelt, who is Honorary Vice-President of the League and strongly in favor of its work, and particularly of its efforts to teach the school boys to shoot, authorized the announcement that he would write a personal letter of congratulation and commendation to the boy certified by the League to have displayed the highest proficiency in shooting during the year. This letter from the President of the United States was naturally valued by the boys more highly than any other prize that could be offered, and great emulation for its possession was excited in the schools.

The matches were shot at Creedmoor on June 29, 1907, and were limited to those boys who had previously won the Marksmanship Badge. There were 12 teams shooting and over 100 competitors. Although but three opportunities were afforded for practice before the matches were shot, the scores showed remarkable skill. Morris High won with 209

out of 250, an average of 41.8 out of 50, although the weather conditions were bad, Commercial made 208 and Boys High 205.

Ambrose Scharfenberg, of the Manual Training High School, Brooklyn, won the President's letter, making a full score in the Whitney Match (with the Sub-Target Gun Machine); 63 out of a possible 70 in the Individual Match, on the range, and 45 points out of 50 in the Team Match, his aggregate score being 158 for the three competitions.

The boys when they came on the range had, of course, no knowledge of the effect of wind and atmosphere, which is necessary to know to be a good shot in the field, particularly at the longer ranges, and which can only be acquired by experience in actual shooting. They were, however, greatly helped by the coaching which was extended to them by a number of the best shots in the National Guard. They had in the previous practice with the Sub-Target Gun Machine learned to sight their rifles accurately, and to hold them steadily, and this was nine-tenths of the battle. They were, therefore, quick to follow the suggestions of their coaches, and very rapidly learned to handle their rifles with the coolness of veterans.

The benefit which would result to the country if the system of the New York High Schools should become general is so highly ap-

preciated by military men that at the meeting at Washington in January last of the National Board for the Promotion of Rifle Practice a report describing the New York method was directed to be printed and copies were sent to the military and educational authorities of all the States. This was eminently wise.

If this system should be extended to the other High Schools of the country, as is rapidly being done, there should be at least 20,000 young men out of those who graduate from these schools every year who will be effective shots with a military rifle, a skill they will never lose. This, in the course of time, will give the country a corps of trained marksmen among the masses of our people, which will make our volunteers, when called upon, efficient soldiers, and therefore will constitute the greatest guarantee for national peace.

The true way to insure peace is for the country to be prepared to protect itself in case of war, and the only way this country will ever become prepared for war is to have the people as a whole trained in the use of the rifle, as their forefathers were at the time of the Colonial and Revolutionary Wars, so that as citizen soldiers they will be formidable to their opponents.

The following extracts from President Roosevelt's letter to Ambrose Scharfenberg, the best shot of the year, graphically states the ques-

tion, and should carry more weight than anything that I can write;

Oyster Bay, N. Y., July 13, 1907.

My Dear Young Friend:

I heartily congratulate you upon being declared by The Public Schools Athletic League to stand first in rifle shooting among all the boys of the High Schools of New York City who have tried during the last year. * * * *

Many a grown man who regards himself as a crack rifle shot would be proud of such a score. Your skill is a credit to you, and also to your principal, your teachers and to all connected with the Manual Training School which you attend, and I congratulate them all. * * * *

I am especially glad of what The Public Schools Athletic League has done in establishing instruction in rifle shooting. The United States has a very small standing army. In time of war it must depend for defence upon hasty levies of volunteers, and it is a prime necessity that the volunteer should already know how to shoot if he is to be of value as a soldier. In no modern war would it be possible effectively to train men to shoot during the brief period of preparation before the army takes the field. In consequence the training must come in advance and the graduates from our schools and colleges should be thus trained so as to be good

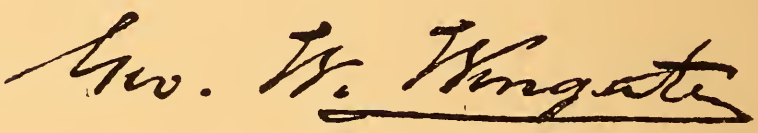
shots with the military rifle. When so trained they constitute a great addition to our national strength and great assurance for the peace of the country.

With all good wishes, believe me,

Sincerely yours,

(Signed) Theodore Roosevelt.

All well-wishers for the future prosperity of the United States should unite in doing everything in their power to secure the introduction throughout the schools of the country of this system of instructing our youth in rifle shooting, which is so strongly commended by President Roosevelt.



President Public Schools Athletic League,
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